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QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO COLONIAL AND OTHER DEPENDENT COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

Written statement submitted by Reporters Sans Frontières, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[25 February 1997]

1. Of the 185 States with a seat at the United Nations, less than one third really respect press freedom. Others do not hesitate to murder - or order the killing of - journalists who give them trouble, imprison those who refuse to do their bidding and gag media that criticize them. This year, Reporters Sans Frontières has decided to point the finger at four States that flout press freedom, often with absolute impunity - Algeria, Cuba, Ethiopia and Turkey.

2. In Algeria, journalists are continual targets of violence: eight were killed in 1996, three of them in a car-bomb explosion that demolished the press building in the centre of Algiers. In all, 57 journalists have lost their lives since May 1993. Many of them had their throats slit by killers believed to belong to Islamic armed groups.

3. On the other side of the conflict, the Government continues to make the privately owned press toe its line by arresting and jailing journalists, censorship and judicial harassment. The State makes full use of all the legal and economic levers at its disposal to subjugate the few remaining newspapers still tempted to assert their independence. It readily attacks journalists by arresting them and throwing them in jail. Abdelkader Benaamane, who worked for the official news agency APS, is serving a three-year term for "jeopardizing State security". Cartoonist Chawki Amari was imprisoned for a month for "lampooning" the Algerian flag. His newspaper was suspended for six months and has not appeared since.

4. As well as relying on a press law known in the profession as "the second criminal code", the authorities censored newspapers seven times in 1996 under a June 1994 interministerial decree on "security-related information". This text stipulates that news about terrorism may only be released by the official news agency. Reading committees have been set up in printing works since February 1996 to make sure these gagging measures are enforced. In practice, censorship also covers human rights matters, as evidenced by the seizure of the weekly La Nation in March.

5. But the Algerian authorities also employ more discreet methods to control the press. They use their monopoly on printing and newsprint imports to put pressure on privately owned newspapers. Some have closed down because printing works refuse to handle them - officially because of "financial problems".

6. Given the legal harassment to which newspaper proprietors are subjected - some have been taken to court up to 20 times - these repressive practices seem unfortunately to have a bright future.

7. Press freedom does not exist in Cuba. In a country where typewriters have to be registered, no dissident news sheets can be circulated: the equivalent of the Soviet samizdat in the 1970s has never developed. Possession of a photocopier or fax machine can land the owner in jail. The handful of independent journalists have to face unrelenting repression, charged with "conspiracy", "enemy propaganda", the crime of "disobedience" and "espionage".

8. In 1996, the five small independent news agencies set up in 1995 were all constantly harassed. The founders of two of them were forced into exile -

Rafael Solano, of Habana Press, who spent 40 days in the Villa Marista State security headquarters before he was banished, and Roxana Valdivia of Patria, who was given the choice of getting out or going to jail. Nine other dissident journalists were detained for more than 48 hours, and 22 were held briefly. Others have been put under house arrest. All this against a backdrop of police raids and a refusal to let international press defence organizations meet threatened journalists.

9. Official intimidation continued throughout the year. Here are a few examples. On 7 March, Olance Nogueras, a reporter with the Buro de Prensa Independiente de Cuba (BPIC) was arrested at Cienfuagos by Inspectors Zamora and Del Sol, who held him for six hours before dumping him 20 kilometres outside town. Olance Nogueras had filed a report on the deaths of the pilots of two light planes shot down by Cuban fighters on 24 February. Lazaro Lazo, managing editor of BPIC, was held for two hours on 12 July on the pretext that he was not carrying papers proving ownership of his bicycle. On 5 October, Nestor Baguer, managing editor of the Cuban Association of Independent Journalists (APIC), was hospitalized for a hip operation after being assaulted in the street in 1995. His two attackers have not been traced.

10. On 6 November, a State security officer known as "Aramis" warned Ana Luisa Lopez Baeza of Cuba Press that her daughter, already barred from university in 1995, would encounter further difficulties if she did not stop working as a journalist. In 1988, Yndamiro Restano Diaz founded APIC. He spent three years in jail for "incitement to rebellion". In September 1995 he founded BPIC. He was authorized to travel abroad, but when he tried to come back he was refused entry on the grounds that he had a "permanent" exit visa. He now lives in exile in the United States.

11. Ethiopia is the African country that has jailed the most journalists. Between 1992 and 1995, nearly 150 media professionals found themselves in trouble with the law. At least 30 were imprisoned at one time or another in 1996. On 1 January 1997, 15 representatives of the privately owned press were under lock and key for doing their job. Only four of them have been sentenced; the rest are awaiting trial, some of them for more than a year. They are charged with publishing information about State security or ethnic conflicts.

12. Ethiopia is also one of the few countries in Africa that uses torture as a method of intimidating journalists. On 1 March, Iskinder Nega, editor of the independent weekly Hubesha, was taken from his home by armed police and placed in solitary confinement at the central criminal investigation department. Around midnight he was taken to another room with a blanket over his head and made to lie face down on the floor. His arms were bound with electric cable and a man sat on his back while he was beaten on the soles of his feet with a "hard and flexible" instrument that he was unable to identify. The police denied arresting him. On 26 March, Iskinder Nega was taken to court in Addis Ababa by the CID and charged with "writings insulting the Government and highly placed officials". The reason was a cartoon published in late 1995 showing a man prostrate under the foot of United States President Bill Clinton. The authorities claimed the man represented Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

13. At least 209 journalists were arrested or jailed in Turkey in 1996. On 1 January 1997, 10 journalists were being held in Turkish prisons for their opinions or for doing their job. During the year, 70 journalists were jailed with no precise reason being given. Torture is still commonplace, particularly in anti-terrorist units that keep a close watch on reporters for pro-Kurdish and extreme-left newspapers. Reporters Sans Frontières recorded at least 30 cases of mistreatment or torture of journalists in 1996.

14. Metin Göktepc, beaten to death by Istanbul police on 8 January 1996, was the twentieth journalist killed while doing his job since 1988. Legal proceedings have been started against 11 policemen accused of active or passive involvement in his murder.

15. Reporters Sans Frontières recorded 154 cases of police violence against journalists between 1 January and 31 December 1996. Out of 109 arrests (lasting up to 48 hours), 53 involved police brutality. Reporters Sans Frontières has also logged 69 cases of attacks, threats and harassment of journalists during 1996.

16. Journalists working for at least 29 Turkish media were put on trial between 1 January and 31 December 1996, and at least 39 media were suspended for periods ranging from a few days to a month. And 53 dailies, weeklies or monthlies were seized under anti-terrorist legislation.